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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

An ideal school should be a place where every child wants to come and where every child is treated with respect and dignity. Schools should be a place where teachers are respected and feel valued about what they have to contribute. The ideal school should be a place where everyone feels welcomed and appreciated. People should feel this as they walk in the building. As a future administrator, I will do my best to make students and staff and other stakeholders feel appreciated, valued and respected.

A Preferred Vision for Leading Secondary Schools:

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Al Blocker

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My interest in education began when I was in high school. I had the opportunity to play the great game of football and was fortunate enough to have had some success at it. The relationships I formed with not only my teammates but the coaches as well, inspired me to pursue this field. When it comes to leadership and education, I think of many things. One, why I became an educator, two, what I believe about education, three, why I decided to enter the educational leadership program to become a Principal, and four, what I believe about leadership.

I became an educator for many reasons. First, I was very fortunate to have many great teachers who not only inspired me but also put up with me. Yes, I know you may be asking yourself, what kind of student was this guy? Well, to be completely honest, I struggled some during my early years of education. I was not what teachers consider a good student. The teachers I had were very patient people who tried hard to motivate me and educate me. For this, I am very grateful. Along with great teachers, I had some very influential coaches. I was fortunate enough to have participated in sports, primarily football. Football not only provided me with the positive atmosphere, but also discipline, guidance, and enjoyment. One of the most influential people in my professional life has been Paul Flynn who completed this Leadership Program a year ago. Paul has been a great educator and friend to me.

When people ask me why I became a teacher I respond with the blanket statement, I love kids. I have always loved being around kids and enjoyed trying to help them grow and become the best people possible. In a selfish way, they give me a great feeling when I see them become successful or watch them grow as individuals. Another reason that I became an educator was the desire to coach football. Football played a big part in my growth and I wanted to pursue this extracurricular activity. The best way to help young adults grow to their fullest potential and pursue coaching was to become an educator. The final reason I entered the field of education was having a desire to enjoy the fringe benefits. What a benefit knowing you will have the summers and all major holidays off, plus, be off work when your kids are out of school.

I spent my first fourteen years in the field of education, teaching students with disabilities. I taught learning disabled students for two years and students identified as behavior disordered for twelve years. Those fourteen years were very challenging, depressing, rewarding, exciting and fun. They also gave me an opportunity to see what education was like for the special need students. These students pushed me to my limits and comfort level. I feel I am much more open to others because of this experience.

Beliefs

Throughout my short career, I have developed many beliefs about education.

My first belief is that all students want and need the feeling of being wanted and cared for. Students deserve to be respected as all people do. One of our roles as educators is to provide this respect and positive interaction with children.

Secondly, education is the foundation of growth. Everyone, including adults need to stay abreast on information in this world of change. We all need information and knowledge to foster our growth and maturity. With a good education, we tend to lead a more productive lifestyle, meet our basic needs and are able to acquire many of the things we like to have. With an education, people usually have better professions, job security, benefits, and in return a happier living. Education also helps enhance in some form or another all three areas of the Wellness Triangle: Social, Mental and Physical. All three of these areas are touched in the world of education.

Thirdly, education is a must for all people. I believe it is our responsibility to provide education to everyone. We must educate all students no matter what level or ability they may be. This is why we have included students with disabilities into the general education environment. Inclusion has forced teachers to find ways to reach all kids, not just the average ability or gifted student. With today's changing world, this has forced schools to change.

Fourth, students are coming to school with more baggage than ever before. More students are products of broken homes. Violence is increasing in society. At least, it is more evident than ever before.

There has been more school related acts of violence in recent years. With all these changes, schools need to change their approach in how they educate today's youth. School must be a safe place for all kids. School should be a place where they can go and not worry about being hurt physically and emotionally. While schools are for all students, schools should provide a learning environment that is not interrupted by students who choose to disrupt the daily lesson. Our government, at times, seems to be so focused on the educational rights of students with disabilities they seem to forget that other students have rights as well to an education that is free from severe disruptions. This is why I believe in Special Education. I agree with the inclusion of special needs children, but there is a fine line that educators, parents and the government should be aware of when making decisions to include them.

Finally, I believe all students want structure. All children complain about rules and expectations, but deep down, I believe they want this structure and long for guidance. Although, children complain about rules and regulation and say they don't like them, with general expectations, children perform at a higher level. Without these expectations, they may drift off in many different directions.

Rationale For Becoming a Principal

There are many reasons why I decided to enter the Educational Leadership Program to become a principal. First as mentioned earlier, I enjoy working with kids.

I have always been interested in leading young people to improve themselves. There are times I will say in a joking way to students, follow me and I will lead you to greatness. I enjoy motivating young people and see that look in their eyes when they have accomplished something they thought was impossible.

Secondly, by becoming an administrator, it will enhance my growth as a person and educator. While being a principal, I will have the opportunity to help not only students, but staff as well. Being a principal will place me in a position to help promote change. I will admit, just being in this program a short time, has made me think of what a principal really does. There is more to it than I expected. When I was younger, I always thought, if I were to stay in education, it only makes sense financially, to move up the ladder and become a principal. I now realize there is more to it than just money. I will have to be ready for all the responsibilities that encompass this position.

I believe there are many aspects of leadership. Leadership is being able to take a vision or goal and help a group of people get to their goal. A person needs to possess many skills in order to accomplish this task. Leaders must have this vision of how they would like to see their outcome. Leaders must then be able to acquire all necessary resources and people to accomplish this task. Leaders must then lead this group and be able to redirect them when time is needed. There will definitely be times of hardship or failures and it is the leader's responsibility to focus the group on their task.

A leader must model the ability to be positive and enthusiastic to their staff.

Leaders must be able to acquire and maintain the trust of their group. In addition to all these characteristics, leaders must be flexible and willing to listen, be strong on certain issues and have an ability to communicate with people in a positive manner. Bigger Faster Stronger's definition of an "eleven" provides a statement which I consider a very good definition of a leader: "A person who holds himself or herself to the highest possible standards in order to attain his/her highest personal destiny and to help others attain their true destiny" (Shepard, 2001).

In writing this reflective paper, I have tried to express my beliefs regarding education and leadership. In doing so, I hope you have learned a little more about me as a person. I was very blessed as a student and owe many people for my education. I hope in return I can give to others.

Developing a Vision of Leadership

"A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p.4). Vision is one of the most frequently used buzzwords in education these days. "Many education experts consider visionary leadership to be a make or break task for school leaders" (Lashway, 1997, p.1).

I chose to write about vision first and foremost because I believe this is where it all begins. I believe that if you want to get somewhere, whether it, be in the business world, in your own personal life or in the educational setting, you must have a vision. As John C. Maxwell states in his book, *Leadership 101* (2002), “Vision is everything for a leader. Vision leads the leader, it paints the target, sparks and fuels the fire within” (p.53). I believe all great things in life have started because someone had a vision. Humans are a very powerful species. We are capable of achieving great things if we set our minds to it. “Vision exists when people in an organization share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes, and goals that should guide their behavior” (Conley,1996). “Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) characterizes vision as an educational platform that incorporates the schools beliefs about the preferred aims, methods, and climate thereby creating a community of mind that establishes behavioral norms” (Lashway, 1997, p.2).

School administrators should have a vision, a goal for their school. This vision should be developed and aligned with school district’s overall vision. Why is it important to have a vision? As mentioned above, vision is basically a goal. “A goal is a dream in the process of being made real. Goals will provide you with meaning and direction” (Shepard, 2001, p.39). Vision is “knowing your desired outcomes and methods of achievement through lots of idea development and the creation of vision” (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p.167).

I once read a poster that stated: “Why Set Goals? If you are aiming for nowhere that is just where you will go.” This statement is true for leaders as well as schools. A school must have a vision in order to set the direction it wants to go and determine the goals to be accomplished.

“Robert Fritz (1996) says that organizations advance when a clear, widely understood vision creates tension between the real and the ideal, pushing people to work together to reduce the gap” (Lashway, 1997, p.2). A school’s vision must reflect the needs and purposes of the surrounding community. A vision that reflects a community’s needs not only improves education, it rebuilds the relationship between the school and their community. In today’s educational setting, it is very important for principals to work with community leaders and stakeholders. We need great partnerships with parents and other members of the community to enhance our children’s education. We are in the education business to improve our children’s educational opportunities and lives.

In athletics, all athletes, teams, and coaches need to have desired goals or a vision of what needs to be accomplished. As cited in a book by Lou Holtz (1998), “All winning teams are goal oriented” (p.44). Teams that win all the time, win because everyone concentrates on specific objectives. A school district is no different. A school district is like a large corporation, a large team. An individual school must function as a team as well. If everyone in a school is focused on the same goal, there will be a better chance for success.

Vision to me is basically asking yourself, what are you trying to accomplish? What do you do each and every day that will bring you closer to your goal? If educators can stay focused on the vision that has been developed, goals will be achieved. Covey's habit 2 from his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* states:

“Begin with the end in mind. Start with an image or paradigm of the end in mind. Have a clear understanding of where you are going, where you are, and what it is going to take to get to the destination” (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p.159).

People should have a clear understanding of their destination. Having this vision will allow them to know where they are currently and give them better direction for decisions that are to come.

Experts differ in how vision is developed. Many think the vision comes from a strong leader with great imagination, energy, and charisma. A leader must be able to jump-start an organization in a desired direction. Others think the vision should be a shared process of many minds. Although there are different viewpoints on where the vision is developed, most would agree the principal plays a pivotal role in shaping the vision. In my experiences, I have seen situations where it would seem that the school had no direction. People seem to be going in all different directions. Students and teachers perform at lower levels than what could be achieved.

The principal is responsible for shaping the school's vision and leading others in that direction. This vision must be one that everyone in the organization can embrace. The school administrator's responsibility is to facilitate and lead the staff and stakeholders toward this established vision. "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community" (Cunningham and Cordeiro, 2003, p.4).

In summary, one of the most critical elements in education for future principals is the development of a vision. As stated above, many experts in the field of education believe this to be true. Other professions such as coaching, and business also believe this to be true. A principal's vision should be one that can be embraced by all stakeholders including teachers, staff and community leaders. Finally, I believe it is the responsibility of the principal to shape the vision and lead others in the desired direction. In conclusion, "Leaders have two important characteristics: first, they are going somewhere; second, they are able to persuade other people to go with them." (Klavora & Chambers, 2003, p.134)

Developing a Positive School Climate

Developing a school climate is a critical element in education for School Administrators. There are many factors that influence how students achieve in the classroom. School climate is one of those factors.

School climate is the second most important aspect a principal needs to establish. After establishing a vision, a principal must work on making the building climate positive. School culture affects a school's climate.

What is school culture? School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school. A school culture influences the way people think, feel, and act. Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning (Peterson, 2002, p.10).

Some schools have a positive culture, where others are negative or what Kent Peterson (2002) described in his article, "*Positive or Negative*" as 'Toxic'. In a positive culture, there is a shared sense of purpose, a commitment and responsibility for learning by all. There is collaboration and collegial relationships between staff, and opportunities for staff to share and reflect. In a 'Toxic' culture, there is a lack of purpose, no collaboration and some times hostile relations among staff. (Peterson, 2002)

When referring to school climate, one may think of many aspects from relationships and procedures, to school safety and decision making. The focus of this section, will concentrate on relationships that are prevalent in schools.

“The principalship is a people business” (Brock and Grady, p.4). School climate begins with the principal and the established relationships that go along with this position. Principals need to treat others well. Leaders need to present a professional image. To do so, a principal would need to have a professional wardrobe, good posture, proper manners and great communication skills. (Brock and Grady) As a leader of the school, the principal will need to establish many relationships. Administrators must be able to communicate and listen to, not only teachers, but students, parents, custodial staff, community members, office staff, district administrators, board members and other stakeholders.

How the staff gets along with each other has a major impact on school climate. I have worked at two different schools as a full time teacher. During my time at these two buildings, I have experienced two different ways the staff interacts with each other. I realize that the size of the building has a bit to do with the closeness a staff may have. In one particular building the atmosphere was very friendly and in the other school, the atmosphere was less friendly. In the building in which the atmosphere was friendly, it was common for every teacher to acknowledge each other and say hello or good morning. In the building in which the atmosphere was not as friendly, I could walk down the hall and pass by a fellow colleague and when I would say, “good morning”, they may not even acknowledge me.

I was completely shocked with how a building or an individual could have such a lack of manners or just overall respect. I thought to myself in a sarcastic way, wow, what a friendly place. So, obviously I believe it is important for a principal to make opportunities for staff to get together. Having staff parties is a good way for people to get to know one another and reward them for their hard work.

The relationships in a school are not limited to teacher/teacher. When talking about relationships, I am referring to teacher/student, administrator/teacher, administrator/students, student/student and staff/community. When dealing with people, respect and dignity should be a main focus. Everyone in the school needs to treat others in a consistent manner and with fairness. Todd Whitaker mentioned in his book that, “effective people build relationships, then others are eager to please them.” (p.12) I believe this statement is true. How administrators interact with staff is an important component in school climate. A principal should treat all staff with respect and dignity. It is important for a principal to build relationships, generate confidence, and foster trust. These skills are essential to establishing leadership. (Brock and Grady)

The principal should also communicate with students by greeting them in the halls, at the door, and in the classrooms. Since students are the reason, schools exists, a principal can schedule regular meetings with students. Principals can eat lunch or visit with them while they are eating. Principals can also allow students to visit them in their office on special occasions.

In an article by Dave Derpak and Jayme Yarema called *Climate Control*, 2002, three core values were discussed that have proven to be beneficial in developing a positive school climate. “Value 1: Be Thoughtful and Make People Feel Special” (Derpak and Yarema, 2002, p. 43). On the first day of school, the principal can greet the staff at the door with a handshake, flowers or just a smile. A principal should thank staff often and recognize them when they accomplish important events in their lives, like weddings, births, and graduating from graduate school. “Value number 2: Get People Involved” (Derpak and Yarema, 2002, p. 44). Derpak and Yarema were referring to principals who attempt to involve parents, students and staff in as many activities as possible to bring them together for the common good. “Value number 3: Recognize and Reward Positive Behavior” (Derpak and Yarema, 2002, p.45). Principals should recognize students who have accomplished good grades, have a principal’s recognition list or a movie day.

Developing and maintaining a positive school culture is a constant challenge, but it cannot be left to chance. A positive culture creates a fun, dynamic, and exciting atmosphere and working environment that has a positive effect, tone, attitude, and actions on teachers and students. (Derpak and Yarema, 2002,)

Instructional Leadership

Before discussing the instructional aspects of administration, let me review and elaborate on the school’s purpose or the purpose of education.

“Vision is everything for a leader. Vision leads the leader, it paints the target, sparks and fuels the fire within” (Maxwell, 2002, p.53). I believe vision is where it all begins. Once the vision of the school has been developed and implemented, a principal must facilitate a positive school culture, where there are high expectations of performance from students and staff alike. “Culture refers to the way things are done within a society” (Wilmore, 2002, p.33). The culture and climate of a school sends a powerful message of what is expected of all involved. If the principal has developed this vision and has prepared the many aspects in which will enhance a school culture, he/she is well on their way of being an instructional leader.

Schools exist to better prepare students for the future. If this is really the case, then strong leaders who are very good at being instructional leaders are needed. Instructional leadership comes in many forms, from the ability to hire quality staff, to improving existing staff through quality staff developments.

How does a principal ensure the improvement of instruction? The most efficient and effective way is hiring high quality teachers. “A principal’s single most precious commodity is an opening in the teaching staff. The quickest way to improve your staff is to hire great teachers at every opportunity” (Whitaker, 2003, p.43). Hiring a great teacher will directly affect the students in a positive manner.

Not all principals are lucky enough to have the opportunity to hire new staff in large quantities, so it would be important to improve the skills of the existing staff. In this changing world and the new requirements of the recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, providing high quality staff developments is essential. Staff developments are required to help improve teacher skills and to help students reach high levels of achievement. Who is a key component in staff development? I believe the principal is.

How can a school district make sure students and staff continue to improve? Although districts can implement policy, change occurs at the individual or building level and the principal is the catalyst.

(Peckron, 2001, p.44)

What does it take to be an instructional leader? As cited in an article by Harold Brewer (2001), there are ten steps to consider when becoming a successful instructional leader. The number one priority to consider for a principal is, “focus on instruction” (p.30). Sometimes, principals may give this responsibility to an assistant principal and according to Brewer this, “hands over the key influence of the school” (p.30). When principals focus on instruction, they put the children first. The focus then is on teaching and learning. For some principals it is easy to get so wrapped up in the daily operations of a school building with budgets, schedules, meetings and extracurricular activities. In this case, principals forget the main focus of their job, that being the instructional leader.

Another strategy to help improve instruction is by providing quality staff developments. Through staff developments, principals can help improve teachers' skills. Principals can provide opportunities for staff to collaborate on strategies used in the classroom and to share successful ideas for improving learning. As cited by Brewer, the sixth step to success was to "support necessary and ongoing professional development for all staff" (Brewer, 2001, p.31).

Administrators need to know how all the pieces fit together when it come to developing a staff development plan. Principals need to know how district comprehensive school improvement plans, district curriculum, site staff development, district programs and site school improvement plans all fit together. If principals can see the connection, they can prepare more meaningful staff developments for their staff.

Rockwood School District in Eureka, Missouri developed and implemented an Administrative Professional Development Plan. In this plan, they mapped out an improvement model, which focused on staff development for principals that increased their knowledge of effective instruction, and how they could develop effective staff developments. In this model, "district administrators met with building principals to discuss where the district had been and where it was going in terms of continuous improvement" (Peckron, 2001, p. 45).

The main focus of this map was to help principals see the connection between school improvement plans, staff development plans and district curriculum. I thought this was a very informative article that emphasized the importance of staff development.

In conclusion, it is vital for a principal to be a strong instructional leader. It is important for a principal to be heavily involved in curriculum at the district level and at the building level. Staff developments are crucial ways to improve the quality of instruction. Finally, when a principal is given the opportunity to hire staff, they must hire quality staff.

Communication is a Critical Element Essential for Exemplary Education Leadership

Throughout my career as an educator, I have found one of the most important characteristics leaders can possess is their ability to communicate effectively with people. A principal's number one priority should be to be an instructional leader. However, to succeed in this job, principals must possess many skills, one of which is being able to communicate with many stakeholders. Communicating with stakeholders within a school community is critical in the success and operation of a school. Administrators deal with difficult teachers, staff members, peers, students and parents daily. The purpose of this section is to identify the three major groups of stakeholders with whom a principal must communicate on a daily basis and provide some necessary tips on communicating successfully.

The major stakeholder groups include people involved in the school, district personnel and community members.

“The principalship is a people business” (Brock & Grady, 2004, p.4).

Principals must communicate with everyone within their building including office staff, teachers, para-educators, custodians, lunch personnel, the students and their parents. As a future administrator, I will need to spend many hours communicating, interacting and collaborating with all these stakeholders.

Although communicating information to stakeholders is important, probably the most important aspect of communication is listening. Being a great listener is essential for principals to do their job effectively. Principals should take the time to listen to others and should listen to their staff. However, principals must be careful not to become too involved in the staffs’ personal issues or lose track of the vision of the school. Principals must be able to effectively communicate with parents and students. As Whitaker and Fiore stated in 2001, “Interacting with parents is one of the most challenging and potentially unnerving tasks that educators deal with on a regular basis” (Pierce & Fields, 2003, p.36).

As a future administrator I plan on treating my staff and parents with respect and common courtesy. Everyone deserves to be treated this way. I plan on having an open door policy and to get out from behind my desk to visit with these stakeholders. All internal stakeholders at times have concerns that either need to be shared or addressed with the school principal.

Therefore, having an open door policy for these internal stakeholders is a must. Teachers and staff want to be kept up to date on a variety of issues that involve the school. However, they don't want to be bombarded with issues that don't pertain to them. As a future administrator, I must decide on what information I share with staff and how this information will be shared.

Principals must not only communicate with their staff, communicating with other district personnel is another crucial role of an administrator. As a future administrator, I will be expected to communicate with my superiors, especially the district superintendent. Keeping superiors abreast on the happenings of my school building are essential. District personnel will want to be notified on issues that may be going on at the building level. With today's "No Child Left Behind Act", district administrators want to know how students are doing academically and where they score on district-wide and state-wide assessments.

Who a principal communicates with is very important. Principals should communicate with other building principals to seek their advice, gain from their experience and learn about new initiatives. Having others who are involved in the same line of work just a phone call away to address the many issues that arise in the course of the school year is an asset to have. As a future principal, I will be expected to communicate with the district human resource department about possible openings at my building and our staffing needs.

Communicating with district operations personnel is another critical area of which a building principal must be able to do effectively. A school building has operational issues that develop daily and through the collaborative efforts between the principal and his or her custodial staff will be maintained. Finally, communicating with district secretaries is vital as well. Principals need to keep in touch with them about district meetings and personnel issues. Communicating with secretaries will take place throughout the course of a school year. As a future administrator, I plan on being an active listener and communicate effectively with all the above stakeholders.

In today's society, school administrators must communicate with other members of the community. Principals must communicate with community agencies such as business partners, business leaders in the community, fire and police personnel, boosters, and parent teacher organizations. Every community is different, therefore principals must know their community and what members want and expect. Along the same lines, it is critical that administrators know how to communicate with the media. Principals should develop good news stories about their school and develop good working relationships with the media. As a future administrator, I plan on having great working relations with all external stakeholders. I will try my best to develop that mutual respect with them.

As a principal, there are many ways to communicate with all stakeholders from teachers and parents to business leaders.

“Just about everything you do in and for your school, involves some form of communication” (Domenech, 2002, p. 36). As a future administrator, I plan on having an open door policy, which entails having face-to-face meetings. I plan on using staff meetings, community meetings, e-mails, phone calls and written letters to communicate the needed information that is required of a building principal.

As one can see, there are many stakeholders with whom a principal must communicate with on a daily basis. All of which are critical in the success of a school building. As cited in an article by Daniel Domenech (2002), “To be a leader, you have to know what you want to say and how to say it to every audience through every means available” (p.36). As a future administrator, I will try my best to treat others with respect and common courtesy and to use as many means of communication as needed.

In summary, I believe an ideal school should be a place where every child wants to come and where every child is treated with respect and dignity. Schools should be a place where teachers are respected and feel valued about what they have to contribute. The ideal school should be a place where everyone feels welcomed and appreciated. People should feel this as they walk in the building. As a future administrator, I will do my best to make students and staff and other stakeholders feel appreciated, valued and respected.

I plan on being a strong instructional leader who stays abreast on instructional strategies, assessments tools and procedures, as well as, curriculum issues. I will keep an open door policy where students, teachers, and parents can come to express their concerns. I will be an active listener and respect other's ideas and opinions. Finally, I will try very hard to lead a staff and all stakeholders to a vision that has been set. Vision will lead everyone in the desired direction, a direction in which all decisions are made in the best interest of all children.

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